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Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

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File Code: 1910

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Dear Friends and Neighbors:

The Dixie, Fishlake, and Manti-La Sal National Forests are working together to assess whether our current forest plans provide adequate direction for managing livestock grazing in aquatic and riparian areas and sagebrush-grasslands. In the past year, we decided to initiate a review of concerns related to natural resource conditions on the ground that may be affected by livestock grazing, and whether there are potential deficiencies in the forest plans. The purpose of this letter is to inform you of our review, to provide you an opportunity to share information you may have about this subject, and to explain our next steps.

Why are we doing this?

We have heard public disagreement about the existing and desired rangeland conditions on national forest lands in southern Utah. These disagreements are based on several factors including:

- new science that was not available when the forest plans were approved in 1986,
- differing values about natural resources, and
- differing understanding of how forest plan direction applies to allotment-specific planning.

Because of numerous issues and conflicting views surrounding livestock grazing we requested a team of resource specialists to conduct an initial review to identify what if any changes in resource conditions have occurred between approval of the 1986 forest plans and today. The team was asked to identify resource concerns, determining whether they might be related to livestock management and what, if anything, in the forest plans' direction could be related to those resource concerns.

What have we done so far?

Where concerns about natural resource conditions were expressed, the team conducted a cursory review of existing conditions. The team based this review on readily available monitoring information; information about existing conditions, including observed changes in natural resource conditions; and new scientific information. The team also reviewed the forest plans and identified potential areas they felt did not provide adequate direction for managing resources potentially impacted by livestock grazing. This information is summarized in a document called "Initial Review of Livestock Grazing Effects on Select Ecosystems of the Dixie, Fishlake and Manti-La Sal National Forests" available upon request or online at <http://go.usa.gov/NnHQ>.

Our initial review indicates that we need to take a harder look at impacts of livestock grazing on riparian, aquatic, and sagebrush grassland ecosystems.



A Summary of the Review

We identified that our existing forest plans do not have clear measurable desired conditions and descriptions for riparian and aquatic areas, and sagebrush grasslands especially in relation to use for domestic livestock grazing. Where we do have desired conditions described, they may not be effective at sustaining the natural resources, they conflict with other direction, or they are not supported by current science. This lack of information in the forest plans can make it difficult for land managers to determine appropriate use in some allotments.

We have also identified concerns about the condition of these areas as they exist in some specific and widespread locations across the three national forests:

Concerns about riparian vegetation include:

- Excessive bare ground which can lead to erosion, invasive plants being present, and aquatic habitat degradation.
- Lack of woody vegetation and diversity of ages and size classes which can lead to more erosion-prone streambanks, higher water temperatures and less value for wildlife species, aquatic habitat degradation.
- Unstable banks, which can lead to more erosion, lower water quality and aquatic habitat degradation.
- Lack of vegetation species diversity which can lead to lower forage production and less value for wildlife species.
- Lack of desirable deep rooted native riparian species which can lead to more erosion, channel incision, lower forage production, less value for wildlife, and aquatic habitat degradation.
- Conversion of hydric (water-dependent) species to upland species which can lead to more erosion and lower forage production.
- Vegetation in the transition area between the water's edge and uplands is lacking diversity and vigor which can lead to erosion, lower water quality, and aquatic habitat degradation and less value for wildlife species.

Concerns about lakes, ponds, springs, and wetlands include:

- Trampling and hummocking can lead to soil compaction, reduction in forage productivity, and increased erosion.
- Conversion of hydric to upland species (which are less productive for all species) and a general loss of what is currently a limiting resource for many other uses.
- Loss of wetted area that can lead to a potential reduction in ground water recharge, and loss of forage production as well as loss of wildlife habitat.
- Increase in invasive plant species.
- Excessive bare ground can lead to increased abundance of invasive undesirable plants and increased erosion.
- Lack of diversity of plant species or vegetation communities.
- Lack of diversity of species and age classes of woody species, when present.
- Potential for a loss of ground water recharge and a loss of available surface water for all users.

Concerns about stream channel habitat include:

- Compaction and bank instability.
- Decreased water infiltration rates and bank shearing.
- Bank incision, erosion and sedimentation.
- Loss of appropriate channel configuration (wider and shallower streams).
- Increased erosion, sedimentation and stream channel damage.

Concerns about sagebrush grasslands include:

- Lack of diversity and cover of perennial plant species, especially perennial forbs.
- Lack adequate herbaceous cover from predation during sage-grouse nesting and brood-rearing.
- Presence of invasive or undesirable vegetation.
- Lack a diversity of sagebrush age-classes.
- Sagebrush is decaying and not regenerating.
- Excessive bare ground and lack of leaf litter.
- Encroachment of pinyon-juniper, which can lead to less available forage.

What is the next step?

Based on the initial review, we have decided to conduct a more detailed assessment of this situation. For efficiency and effectiveness, we are conducting the assessment for all three national forests because of similarities in their natural resources and ecosystems. The primary purpose of the assessment is to determine whether there is a compelling need to change the forest plans with an amendment. The assessment will not be a decision-making document but instead will provide a rapid evaluation of existing and available information relevant to the concerns. The assessment will:

- ◆ describe the current conditions and trends of the resources we are concerned about, and what the forest plans currently prescribe for managing those resources;
- ◆ define key conditions necessary to maintain the riparian, aquatic, and sagebrush grassland ecosystems based on the best available scientific information;
- ◆ examine if the desired conditions, goals, or objectives stated in the current forest plans are adequate for today's management situations; and
- ◆ identify any preliminary needs for change in the forest plans.

If we determine there is a need to change any or all of the forest plans, we will initiate another public involvement process related to developing an amendment that would be applicable to all three national forests' plans. Developing an amendment would also require a National Environmental Policy Act environmental analysis, before any decisions can be made.

How you can be involved

We are looking for other current information you may have for us to consider for this assessment. Specifically, we encourage you to share material such as photos or data you may have related to the current conditions or trends of riparian vegetation, groundwater-dependent ecosystems, physical stream

channel conditions, or sagebrush grasslands. The initial review document described previously lists information that we already have available. We also encourage you to share information about social, economic, and ecological values relevant to these ecosystems and the use of these ecosystems for livestock grazing. To be most useful, please provide your input within 45 days of receiving this letter. We are anticipating that the assessment will be completed this fall.

Your input is important to us. We encourage contribution of information relating to the three-forest scale, individual forest-scale, as well as beyond the forest if related to the management of livestock grazing on the forest. Each plan is unique to the needs of the people and communities being served. The result of the assessment may be the preliminary identification of needs for change applicable to one, two, or all three forest plans.

You can submit electronic comments to: grazingassessment@fs.fed.us. Written comments should be addressed to Attn: John Zapell Fishlake National Forest, 115 E 900 N Richfield, UT 84701, or via Fax: 435-896-9347.

All comments, including names and addresses when provided, are placed in the project record and are available for public inspection.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Shirley Frank, Interdisciplinary Team Leader and Environmental Coordinator, TEAMS, Forest Service at 559-920-6358 or safrank@fs.fed.us or John Zapell, Public Affairs Officer, Fishlake National Forest at 435-896-1070 or jzapell@fs.fed.us.

Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

Thank you for your interest in this process.

Sincerely,



ANGELITA S. BULLETTTS
Dixie Forest Supervisor



ALLEN ROWLEY
Fishlake and Manti-La Sal Forest Supervisor